

# Culture, Power, and Education: The Philosophies and Pedagogy of African Centered Educators

by

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The low academic performance of African American children has become a staple of the American educational system. At this point, conversations about Black children and failure are merely good ‘coffee talk’ for many. Afrocentric (African centered / African centered) education is the only culturally centered comprehensive approach to addressing problems of miseducation, but there are complications: often African centered efforts are given short shrift in school systems, ignored in educational research, and most interestingly those asked to discuss or lead Afrocentric efforts are often opponents of the theories. While all of the aforementioned complications still exist, a band of African centered teachers continue to make a difference for students. This article focuses on the philosophies and pedagogies of three African centered teachers who are well-known for their impact on African American students. Descriptive vignettes are used to provide thick, rich descriptions of these African centered teachers.

## Introduction and Background

Many scholars have pointed out that Black children in America’s schools are suffering at an alarming rate. For example it is now commonly known that Black children are consistently found at the bottom of virtually all data that are reported about student academic performance. But what seems to have gone overlooked is

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the fact that if Black children miraculously appeared at the top of those tiers, we would still have a major problem, and perhaps an even bigger problem than we have now. The following question still has not been addressed:

*“What does it mean for a Black child to perform well within a school system and on standardized tests that are historically and inherently designed to prove and maintain white supremacy” (Shockley, 2008, p. 8).*

While that question often quiets people, it really should not be ignored. Too many in the education community are not interested in having a dialogue about the historical and inherent true nature of the system, yet Black children continue to suffer, and solvable problems in Black communities continue to go unresolved. Many other innovative programs and projects have been put into place to help Black children, but such innovations have fallen short of doing much. No mainstream programs are designed to afford an educational experience which empowers members of the Black community (via children) to “control the psychic and physical spaces that [Blacks] call their own” (Akoto, 1992, p. 3).

Perhaps the most comprehensive approach to addressing the problem of Black miseducation is Afrocentric education. The Afrocentric approach in education involves working with Black students to master the academic disciplines from a perspective that grounds them in an African reality. That means children are taught about events, places, people and things, with crucial reference to and in the critical context of the historical trajectory of people of African descent. While some mainstream canon writers have expressed their unhappiness about people of African descent taking such matters into their own hands (Bossenkool, J. & van Rinsum, H., 2007; Howe, 1998; Lefkowitz, 1992; Schlesinger, 1992), Afrocentricity is actually no different than what Catholics, Jews, Asians and Latino’s do – they participate in the larger society while teaching their children to pledge first allegiance to their own group (Hilliard, 1997). Proponents of Afrocentric education wish to impress upon African American parents the desperate need for an educational experience that includes proper cultural grounding (i.e., “reAfricanization,” which will be explained later in this article).

The purpose of this study is to offer a snap shot of the work of Afrocentric teachers by uncovering their philosophies and investigating their practices, so that we can learn from them. Few works have investigated the philosophies and pedagogy of Afrocentric teachers. Considering the educational conditions under which Black children now exist, perhaps much can be gained from such an investigation.

This study is organized as follows. First we present discussions and literature which help advance understanding of Afrocentric education. Second, since Afrocentric education is often marginalized, we present a conceptual framework that provides some grounding to explain how the theories make sense to those who subscribe to them. Third, the Africological ethnographic case study research method that was used for this study is presented. Fourth, the findings are laid

out using vignettes to provide rich descriptions of the three participants. Finally, the implications and conclusions argue that mainstream educators should provide more support for Afrocentric teachers.

## Toward Understanding Afrocentric Education

Afrocentric education scholars advance several concepts that constitute the cultural imperatives of Afrocentric ideas in education. The cultural imperatives are the “main ingredients” of Afrocentric ideas in education. In other words, certain concepts provide the ideological basis for creating an Afrocentric experience. The concepts include identity, Pan Africanism, African/African American culture, African values adoption and transmission, Black Nationalism, community control/institution building and education as opposed to schooling. All of those concepts are part and parcel of the reAfricanization process (explained later). In the process of working with children and communities, Afrocentric educationists incessantly use those concepts – they are the baseline stated and ostensible “material” of African centeredness. In the next section we provide a brief description of each construct. (For a fuller description of these constructs, see Shockley, 2007; Shockley & Frederick, 2008).

### *The Critical Need for an African Identity and Pan Africanism*

Afrocentric educators and scholars advance the notion that Black children are, in fact Africans, and since they are Africans, they should be taught from a cultural perspective that is Pan Africanist. Pan Africanism is the belief that all people of African descent throughout the world are Africans. Afrocentric educators believe that the identity crisis began for African (Americans) as soon as the first ship left the African shore. That is, the Black identity crisis has its roots in the chattel slavery experience in America. Afrocentrists call for the enactment of Pan Africanism by asserting that “The Pan Africanist principle is the belief that Africa is the home of all people of African descent and all Black people should work for the total liberation and unification of Africa and Africans around the world...and schools for African American children should be based upon this principle” (Lomotey, 1978). With Africa as the “common theme” among people of African descent, African/African American culture must be used as a guide to restore African humanity (Akoto, 1992; Akoto & Akoto, 1999; Anwisye, 2006; Hilliard, 1991; King, 2005; Lomotey, 1978; Madhubuti, 1973).

### *ReAfricanization: African Culture and Values Adoption and Transmission*

Afrocentric educators and scholars believe that children of African descent must be taught their African cultural heritage for the purpose of reAfricanization. ReAfricanization is literally the process of studying, observing, and eventually fully practicing an African culture. Traditionally, the ancestors of people of African

descent have used various cultural practices and beliefs as guides to define, create, celebrate, sustain and develop themselves. Afrocentric educationists purport that this longstanding tradition of using African culture in such ways is threatened because Blacks are unaware of African cultures. According to Molefi Asante (1988), Blacks not knowing about cultures that have bought them thus far causes, "... their images, symbols, lifestyles, and manners [to be] contradictory and thereby destructive to personal and collective growth and development" (p. 1). Karenga's research included his study of several cultural groups on the continent of Africa as he attempted to find ways to concretely demonstrate what an African values system is, and how such value systems relate to the cultures of Black people. In that same vein, Madhubuti explains that "Our survival lies in our ability to operate out of an African frame of reference based upon a proven value system that incorporates a sense of African love and responsibility" (1973, p. 14). This type of transmission leads to a sense of African nationalism (Ani, 1994; Asante, 2007; Bradley, 1978; Hale-Benson, 1982; Hilliard, 1996, 1997, 2002; James, 1954; King, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1992; Lomotey, 1978; Nobles, 1986).

### *Black Nationalism*

Afrocentric educators and scholars believe that wherever Blacks happen to be in the world, they constitute a nation or a nation that is within a nation, and that concept is called Black nationalism. Black nationalism requires that Blacks develop a sense of agency toward fixing the problems within their own communities. Black children must be the catalysts for helping to instill a sense of agency in the Black community because Afrocentrists believe that the generations before have only been taught how to consume and be dependent on outside entities. Agency eventually leads toward nationbuilding. Agency and nationbuilding involve the intentional and focused attempt to "develop African youth to be specifically trained to further develop and "administrate the state" (that is, control the community). Blacks cannot learn to "administrate the state" if they are not equipped with attitudes that teach them that they, in fact, should administer and be agents for Black upliftment. Black nationalism is the carrier of such a sentiment, that is, Black nationalism teaches Black children that Blacks constitute a nation. The literature on Afrocentric education identifies nationalistic community building as a call for Blacks to build institutions that will sustain African life (Bradley, 1978; Hilliard, 1996, 1997, 2002; James, 1954).

### *Community Control/Institution Building*

Afrocentric educators and scholars hold and maintain that there can be no true Afrocentric education unless and until people of African descent create and control the institutions within the Black community. Institution building involves creating the necessary agencies that are designed to "impart knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary to survive and progress" (Dougherty, 1973, p. 3). The

assumption made by Afrocentric educationists is that Black-owned and controlled education systems "...will eliminate the injustices and miseducation of the present educational system, and create a strong basis for change in the lives of people of African descent" (Doughty, 1973, p. 3). It follows though that since the adults in Black communities have been miseducated, a process of reclaiming responsibility and resurrecting the community must take place in schools for generations to come. Afrocentric educators worry though, because schools train, they do not educate (Doughty, 1973; Lomotey, 1978; Madhubuti, 1973; Ratteray, 1990).

### *Education as Opposed to Schooling*

Afrocentric scholars distinguish between education – which is a transformative process that leads toward skill mastery and knowledge of oneself, and training – which is a process of learning how to get along in a system. True education offers students knowledge of how to administer within their own communities and how to solve the problems therein as well. In his (1994) book, Shujaa skillfully explains the difference between education and schooling while also highlighting the detrimental effects when we mistake one for the other:

The schooling process is designed to provide an ample supply of people who are loyal to the nation-state and who have learned the skills needed to perform the work that is necessary to maintain the dominance of the European-American elite in its social order. For African Americans, individual success in schooling is often simply a matter of demonstrating one's ability to represent the interests of the European American elite. Through such a process, African people as a group are able to derive little benefit from the schooling of our members and, even then, it is most likely to be in the interests of the European American elite for us to do so (p. 10).

It is improbable that the education that Blacks receive in public institutions will ever reform itself to the point that Blacks receive the tools that are necessary for them to have agency over their lives. For this reason, Afrocentric educationists call for a revolutionary re-conceptualization of Black education. This re-conceptualization is anchored by the concept of reAfricanization (King, 1992; Shujaa, 1994; Woodson, 1933).

### *Conceptual Framework*

ReAfricanization calls for people of African descent to reattach themselves to African cultures. Although African culture is understood as non-static, the traditional practices of continental Africans are viewed as proper cultural examples for people of African descent. The question of which African culture one attaches to is of little concern to those in favor of reAfricanization because they maintain that any cultural attachment to Africa would be more beneficial than Western culture is because it alienates Blacks children from themselves. The three broad

overlapping stages of reAfricanization (including rediscovery/historical recovery, redefinition/cultural reaffirmation, and revitalization/national liberation) constitute the phases that people who are committed to reAfricanization go through. The three stages indicate crucial aspects of what is considered to be a return to African cultural practice. (Akoto & Akoto, 1999)

The Afrocentric understanding of culture includes Blacks from all over the world adopting African cultures because within African culture lies the answer(s) to many of the challenges that Black people face. Afrocentric theorists and educationists believe that African cultural practice must be viewed from an indigenous African perspective because western implementations have moved such cultures toward becoming more palatable to European tastes and preferences. Those cultural assertions under gird what Afrocentric educationists wish to transmit to students in Afrocentric schools.

Therefore, Afrocentric education is the employment of Afrocentric ideology and the use of “culturally relevant pedagogy” in order to effectively teach and reach Black children. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994, 2001) proposes effective and culturally relevant pedagogy as education that (1) looks beyond explanations of cultural deficit, (2) seeks to improve student achievement while maintaining identity, and (3) challenges inequitable school and societal structures (p. 18).

According to Ladson-Billings (2001), culturally relevant pedagogy is centered in a way that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically” (p. 4). While Ladson-Billings calls for transformation of the public education system through the use of culturally relevant methods, Afrocentric educationists do employ culturally relevant methods, but generally do not petition or seek redress from the American public education system because they believe it to be the responsibility of Black people to solve their own problems. While Ladson-Billings’ discussion of identity also fits within more mainstream conceptions of identity development in student’s educational processes, Afrocentric educationists view “identity” vastly different – as a concept that is connected to a larger struggle for African people’s survival and independence, which is rooted in their conception of African cultural adoption.

### *Afrocentric Education in Practice*

Afrocentric education is the implementation of African cultural ethos into the educational process. Afrocentric teachers conceptualize the educational process in vastly different ways than the majority of American public school leaders. While their conceptualizations are different, Afrocentrics do not argue that they are necessarily better for everyone, just better for African American students. Several authors point to the benefits of Afrocentric schooling. In the past, researchers have indicated that some students and schools which have been the most challenged have adopted Afrocentric education ideas and methodologies to completely trans-

form and become the most competitive institutions within school districts (Ratteray, 1990; Hilliard, 1991).

In Michigan, Wisconsin, and Missouri Afrocentric education methods were used to raise students' standardized test scores and overall achievement ability. Schools such as Sankofa Shule in Lansing, MI, Malcolm X Academy in Detroit, MI, and Chick Elementary Charter School in Kansas City, MO, (all Afrocentric institutions) have all successfully moved from the bottom tier within their respective states to the top tier (Hilliard, 2003; Delpit, 2006). Afrocentric education includes theoretical and practical methodologies that involve many of the centuries old ways that Africans approached education. Considering the poor performance of African American children in public schools across the country, more work must be done to understand the methods and philosophies of Afrocentric educators. This paper utilized Africalogy and critical ethnography to capture the philosophies and pedagogies of three Afrocentric educators.

### *Methodology*

The Africological critical ethnographic case study approach was best suited to unveil the theories and practices of these Afrocentric educators since Africalogy requires deep knowledge of the history and background of informants and ethnography requires prolonged field engagement. Deep knowledge is critical in cases such as this one where participants could be misinterpreted because of their perspectives, which are vastly different from mainstream perspectives. As was true in the case of this work, prolonged field engagement placed researchers in the advantaged position of "knowing from doing and participating" not just knowing from observing and interviewing. Asante (1990) defines Africalogy as, "The Afrocentric study of phenomena, events, ideas, and personalities related to Africa" (p. 14).

The critical ethnographic method combines critical theory and the discipline of ethnography. Critical theorists hold that, "...schools, as venues of hope, can become sites of resistance and democratic possibility" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 280). In the case of this research, the critical posture acted as "method" as we examined teachers' abilities to act as democratic leaders who should offer hope to their students. we examined each teachers practice to see if s/he seemed to want to "...serve students well and responsibly" (Fine, Weiss, Weseen, & Wong, 2000, p. 122), by adhering to the imperatives of Afrocentric education as advanced by Afrocentric educationists and scholars in the development of the constructs (which were laid out earlier). As Afrocentric educationists continue to advance the imperatives of Afrocentric education for the purpose of emancipation, this research critically examined the practices and beliefs of school teachers.

The following research question guided this study: What are the important philosophical beliefs and pedagogies of teachers who self-identify as being Afrocentric (Afrocentric / Afrocentric)?

### Case Selection

Each of the teachers in this study is well known in their respective communities as being effective educators. Two of the participants (Baba Akil and Mama Binta) are school leaders as well as full-time teachers within their respective institutions. Baba Akil has been teaching at National Afrocentric School (NAS) for over 30 years, and Mama Binta has been teaching at Charter Road Afrocentric School (RC) for 10 years (prior to that she taught for nearly 20 years at an Afrocentric private school). Brother Ture is much younger than Mama Binta and Baba Akil and has been teaching at Boston Charter School for 3 years (prior to that he taught for 2 years at a high school in Boston). These three educators were chosen because, 1). They are very well-known in their communities for their work with children (Baba Akil and Mama Binta are also founders of the schools in which they teach), 2). All three of the teachers in this study embrace the notion of being Afrocentric; they believe that Afrocentric teaching is the best type of teaching for Black students, and 3). They were accessible for observation and interviews throughout the study.

### Data Collection and Analysis

In order to document their philosophies and practices, each teacher agreed to participate in both formal and informal interviews as well as classroom observations. During the interview phase, teachers were asked questions such as: What is an Afrocentric teacher and do you self-identify with all of the precepts of being Afrocentric? What kinds of things do you do in your classroom to create an Afrocentric learning experience? Why do you teach from an Afrocentric perspective? Observations were conducted over a four year period with over 60 visits to NAS and RC. Observations were conducted for one year at BCS which resulted in 15 visits. Brother Ture was also observed for one semester (8 additional observations) after he relocated to Washington, DC.) NAS is an Afrocentric private school in Washington, DC; RC is an Afrocentric public charter school in DC; and BCS is a public charter school in Boston that is not billed as being "Afrocentric."

This is an ongoing, broad study of Afrocentric education broadly that began in 2002. This specific investigation of teachers' beliefs and pedagogies began in fall 2005. Data were retrieved by means of classroom observations, attending Afrocentric education meetings and conventions (such as the annual *Return and Retrieve It Conference* at NAS, the *Council of Independent Black Institutions Conference*, and the *Afrocentric Education Leadership Roundtable*) participating in Afrocentric leadership meetings (the Ndundu), formal and informal interviews of the leaders themselves and of their faculty and staff members, participation in African rituals and events (such as the annual *Nom* cultural event in Virginia, and African cultural festivals), and joining an Afrocentric parent "community collective" started by Brother Ture at BCS. Data were secure in an electronic notebook,



audio interviews and visual productions were also secured, and *The Ethnograph* v. 5.0 was used to assist with coding and data management.

### *Findings*

In this section three vignettes of teachers' practice are presented. Embedded herein are also revelations of these teachers' philosophies. "Brother Ture" is a self-labeled Afrocentric middle school teacher who attempts to reach his students by getting them excited to learn about all of the accomplishments of people of African descent. "Mama Bintu" is a well-known Afrocentric educator who carries a philosophy that Afrocentric knowledge and education should be seen as very basic first steps to restoring that which was lost during the historical periods of African subjugation. "Baba Akil" is an extraordinarily well-known Afrocentric educator as well as a leader in the Black community. His work with students features patience, understanding, and constant displays of wisdom amid his unassuming personality. Included in each vignette are teachers' philosophies and observations of their teaching practices.

#### *Brother Ture*

Brother Ture is perhaps the most energetic teacher I have ever seen in a classroom. One of the most intriguing things about him is that his students connect with him so deeply. During the two and a half years of classroom observations, Brother Ture has taught at three different schools (he relocated from Boston to Washington, DC in 2007). Students from prior institutions where he has taught constantly call on the phone telling him about what is happening in their lives, giving him updates, and telling him how much they miss him being their teacher. One year of observation of Brother Ture occurred as he taught middle school students in Boston at Boston charter school (BCS). There were 250 students and the school has grades 6 through 8. The school is not officially billed as being an Afrocentric institution, however Brother Ture convinced the principal to adopt some Afrocentric ideas for the school, and he himself is known throughout the city for his Afrocentric work with children.

Brother Ture begins class before students even enter the classroom. They line up in the hallway and he makes a few announcements. As they stood in the hallway, Brother Ture said to the 8<sup>th</sup> graders before entering social science class, "Today you're going to be looking at some college level information from a book called *Powernomics* by Claud Anderson. If I didn't think you could do it would I have you do it?" The students verbally confirmed that they could do the work. As the students entered the classroom, the boys stood behind their chairs until after the girls sat down and got comfortable. He complemented the students continuously before and after they entered the classroom saying things like "you all look like beautiful African kings and queens today" and after Kim dropped her books he said, "Asante (thanks) brother Andre for helping out Sister Kim."

Once the students were seated, he began talking about roman numerals. He interrupted himself from the lesson and said, "Alright, stand up everybody and raise your hands in the air. Repeat after me, "Brother Ture, please help me to get my mind black." The students repeated it. He then said, "Now on to roman numerals, where did they originate from?" The students said "Africa!"

Then he wrote on the board:

I=1; V=5; X=10; L=50; C=100; D=500; M=1000

He said, "What do you do if something is written on the board?" The students replied, "Get it in your notebook!" He then said, okay, I'm going to give you a chance to get this down, and after you get it into your notebook say, "I got it Brother Ture, my mind is black." The students said it as they completed it.

Then he wrote the following on the board:

XVI=?; CCXXII=?; IV=?; XD=? XXL=?

He went around checking student answers. He spoke with the students individually about what they were writing. Brother Ture solicited for volunteers to come to the board to solve the various number problems above. As students volunteered he tossed markers to them (some from behind his back). Students went to the board and solved. Brother Ture gave students a high five as they solved problems correctly.

Brother Ture's style is a high-energy, fast-paced one that includes constant intermittent opportunities for students to recite things they have been taught that refer to Afrocentrism. For example, most lessons include periodic quotations that quiz the students on the sayings of important African figures. As he taught a lesson on Civil Rights he would interrupt with "Who said Africa for the Africans?" or "What was Mary McLeod Bethune famous for?" or "Who founded the UNIA?"

He said "On your dollar bill there's a pyramid." A student was eager to talk about it. Brother Ture discussed how the Nubians built the first pyramids. He pointed out that on the dollar bill it reads "MDCCLXXVI". He said, "I'll give you a hint: Declaration of Independence." A few students replied, "1776!" Without pause he held up a statue of Imhotep and said, "Who is this brilliant man?" A student answered correctly. Then he said, "Who can tell me something about him." A student said that he was a multi-genius. He said "What's a multigenius?" Students continued to answer: he was a doctor, he built the first step pyramid, he was a physician.

Brother Ture said, "The Greeks brought civilization to the world. True or False?" Students said "False". He told them that they were right and said that the Greeks invaded Ta Meri (ancient Egypt) in about 332 BC. He said "The Greeks plagiarize, imitate and destroy." He said, "Is rap star Eminem an example of this?" The students said yes. Brother Ture told the students a story about using the on the

“N-word”. Students found the story intriguing – and they began talking about all the people who still use that word within their community.

The students seem to hang onto Brother Ture’s every word. Yet we wondered about how Brother Ture saw himself as a teacher. He stated:

“If this work is a job, career or a calling, for me I would say it’s a calling. I didn’t pick education, education picked me. Education is a major part of liberation. The education that I do is way beyond the classroom. Even if I wasn’t doing this exactly, I always focused on the young. Education is a lifelong process of becoming conscious. Most of our children get their information from our oppressors. Without our consciousness we’re equal to animals. Consciousness is the ability to analyze the environment you’re in and use what you know to benefit your people. Without it we’re animals, because all an animal does is eat, [use the restroom], fight, and play and have sex. With my consciousness I think about how I must have food for others; instead of trying to have sex, when I’m human I’m trying to father children, and instead of sleeping I’m planning and organizing to figure out who the enemy is and how he works. I bring all that to the classroom to try and be someone that our students can model.”

Brother Ture’s energy and his youthful vitality are attractive to students. Several of his students were asked what they thought about him as a teacher, and every student has said that he was their favorite teacher. When asked why he was their favorite teacher, many of them say that he is the only person who actually teaches them something. Brother Ture has taken his students to Africa, and he engaged them in competitions with students from other areas throughout Boston. For example they debated a wealthy prep school in Boston on matters related to history and they were able to defeat students from that school. The school where Brother Ture taught in Boston is a relatively poor all-Black public charter school where many students receive free lunch. However, even with those factors, Brother Ture has been able to get his students to memorize facts about Africa, and he has made them excited about gaining cultural knowledge. Many who work with him believe that he has a special gift to work with the children; however he believes that a teacher of Black students must simply love Black people ... an idea that is very familiar to other Afrocentric educators, such as Mama Binta.

### *Mama Binta*

Mama Binta has been an Afrocentric school leader and educator for 33 years. She was one of the first to start an Afrocentric private school in Washington, DC. Mama Binta founded CLAR Afrocentric private school 33 years ago. Ten years ago she founded CR Afrocentric public charter school. Mama Binta served as teaching principal of CLAR for 22 years. She is now a teaching principal at CR public charter. That is, while Mama Binta works as principal of the school, she is also teaching there full-time, but sometimes she teaches a little less than full-time. One of her most distinguishing characteristics is an attitude that “Afrocentric education just makes common sense” as she always says. Mama Binta’s teaching

practices have been formally or informally observed regularly for the entire ten years that she has been teaching at CR public charter school.

While Brother Ture and Baba Akil both use a lot of African proverbs and references to great leaders, Mama Binta's approach is much more subtle. In fact, one can almost "feel" that she truly believes what she has said, "Afrocentric education for Black children is like bird education for birds, dog education for dogs, or chicken education for chickens." Simply put, the education that Black children receive should be relevant to the Black community. CR is an open school environment that has students from grades 1 to 8. Mama Binta is teaching 4<sup>th</sup> graders at the moment.

Mama Binta's way of getting started with the teaching day does not feature much more than a "Habari Gani?" (Kiswahili for *what good news do you have?*) Her connection to students differs from Brother Ture in that it appears more relationship and/or situation oriented. During one lesson, after she greets the students, she asks them to look at the overhead projector where she has presented some math problems. The 4<sup>th</sup> graders seem familiar with her process, yet a few students (such as Maya) wish to focus on other things ... such as talking with their neighbor. Mama Binta is sitting down hunkered over a worksheet close to another student while she begins instruction. She says, "Okay Maya what are you doing right now?" Maya answers, "Working." And then she gets to work. Then, Mama Binta says, "Tonio and Safisha, are you ready to learn?" They answer affirmatively. Mama Binta says, "Okay then, Tonio go on up to the projector and show us how to master addition by solving the first problem." Tonio demonstrates. I noticed the language she used to encourage Tonio that he is able to master mathematics, not just do math problems. Mama Binta says, "Nice job, now Maya why don't you try number two." When Maya finishes with the wrong answer, Mama Binta says, "See, when you're back there talking to your neighbor you sometimes miss out on how to carry [numbers]." She says to the class, "Four from six I can not take, so I do what?" They respond, "borrow one from the five." Not everyone responded, so she said, "I do what?" Then the full chorus, "Borrow one from the five." Mama Binta says, "What did you do Maya?" Maya explains, "I didn't borrow one from the five." Mama Binta goes over and sits next to Maya and works a problem with her. About a minute later, Mama Binta works another problem on the overhead with all of the students.

RC is a relatively small school of 100 students from grades pre-K through 8. There are three big open work areas, two office spaces, and a couple of conference rooms. Unlike many Afrocentric schools, CR presents a much newer environment, yet like many Afrocentric schools, the environment is very colorful, with red, black, and green walls. An African flag flies outside of the school. Walking into CR it looks more like a doctor's office than a school until you proceed down the long corridor where you see the first big work space. Along the walls are laminated pictures of African American leaders such as Dr. John Henrik Clarke (one of Mama Binta's favorites), Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and Ida B. Wells.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of CR that is a bit different than many Afrocentric schools is that there are many of the same posters that are used in public school settings hanging on the walls as well. For example, there are posters with European American children making educational statements hanging on some walls. However, most of the posters feature people of African descent.

The environment at CR matches Mama Binta's views about culture. Whereas Brother Ture is much more nationalistic in his tone and tenor, Mama Binta presents more interest in cross-cultural learning; however, she believes that learning about oneself is primary. In an attempt to understand how she views cross-cultural learning and African cultural learning, Mama Binta was asked if she thought students needed to be completely steeped in African culture or if they should be exposed to something more cosmopolitan. She responded:

"You know, cultures need to close ranks with their children so that their children begin to know who they are. So it's good as you go on in life to be exposed to other cultures... that's excellent. But to be taught by your own culture is especially important, and any group of people be they Latino or Asian or whatever, in a country that is a "melting pot" you have to be something to "melt from" so in helping a child to understand who he is he must have a love of himself, be empowered by who he is. Because only when you know and appreciate who you are and appreciate and practice your culture can you love, like or appreciate any other people as equals. I think that's why there are so many Latino gangs and other gangs, because when people feel disenfranchised they use negative means to be somebody and make their mark. So the opinion about people not working together, the idea that we need to have all the kids working together and having a hodge podge of people is interesting, but you must *first* learn to work together with your own kind, like a baby has to learn to work with his/her own siblings *first*."

Mama Binta's school is Afrocentric, but she and staff members there have not engaged in formal cultural reattachment (reAfricanization). At CR, teachers use the commonly known Afrocentric inclusions such as the Nguzo Saba and Maat to guide behavior and community interactions with one another. For example, at the top of the homework worksheet that Mama Binta gave out there was a "symbol" for Maat (a winged goddess). Underneath the Maat symbol it read "I am because we are." There were 12 math problems on the worksheet. Mama Binta said, "Let's work through the first two problems together. Okay? What first?" A student named Baruti said, "Maat!" Mama Binta said, "Exactly! What about Maat?" Baruti said, "It means that we can do this work." Mama Binta wanted more. Ashanti said, "Mama Binta, [isn't] Maat what means truth and justice and togetherness." Mama Binta said, "Yes! Now let's work these problems." Maat is an ancient value system that includes seven cardinal virtues and 42 negative confessions. Truth and justice are two of the cardinal virtues.

Mama Binta uses techniques that come from a variety of African traditions in her teaching. However, for the most part she relies on commonsense cultur-

ally relevant techniques. In her classroom I observed her using call-and-response methods, drill-and-skill, memorization, group work, individual work, student demonstration, teacher demonstration and direct teaching. Interspersed throughout all of her lessons are important facts about Africa and African Americans that cause students to connect deeply with the lessons. The way that students are so engaged with her is familiar because the same is observable when other Afrocentric educators teach, especially Baba Akil.

### *Baba Akil*

Perhaps the greatest difference between the three educators in this study is highlighted in Baba Akil's knowledge and use of African culture. While Brother Ture and Mama Binta use African culture as reference points in their teaching, Baba Akil is an actual practitioner of an African culture – he is deep in the process of reAfricanization. While Baba Akil's own family practices the Yoruba tradition [sic], they do not advance Yoruba culture within the school. Instead, they use Yoruba culture (and other African cultures) as a guide to inform the cultural direction of the school.

Baba Akil is also a teaching principal with over 30 years of experience. He often teaches a class called *Pan African History*. His teaching style presents a wide variety of culturally centered pedagogical offerings. Class begins before he officially starts teaching. As a precursor to class students recite the following pledge:

We are an African people, struggling for national liberation. We are preparing leaders and workers to bring about a positive change for our people. We stress the development of our bodies, minds, souls and consciousness. Our commitment is to the self-determination, self-respect and self-defense of our race.

After the pledge, students are habituated to immediately review what is on the chalkboard while engaging in silent reflection about its contents. On the chalkboard read important happenings from around the world, for example, "Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez insinuated that President Bush was like a devil. What did he mean by that? Metaphorically speaking, what is the appropriateness and truth or falsehood of this statement?" On the adjacent section of the same chalkboard read "In the paper today it reads that some Haitians are reverting to eating mud pies (actual dirt) because they are so hungry. Is the problem that they do not know how to provide food for themselves, or is there a historical and/or cultural reason why they are now experiencing such destitution?" On the last section of the same chalkboard it read, "What is the definition of Pan Africanism and why do many Africans believe we need [Pan Africanism] now?"

We as researchers wondered if middle school students could tackle such in-depth and intricate questions. As the students looked at the board, most of them looked around while they pondered their answers to the question. Some of them

wrote ideas in their journals. It stays pretty quiet during these “warm ups.” The warm ups are preps for the days class session. After about 10 minutes, Baba Akil asked students for their responses to the questions. Students may respond to any of the questions they wish. One student, Kwabena, began as most of them did by stating, “Baba, I was thinking about number two and I think that they need another revolution in Haiti.” There were some noticeable variations in the levels of sophistication in student answers. Kwabena began at NAS last year during his 5<sup>th</sup> grade year. The students who have been at the school for more than a few years answer differently. Kwao has been at NAS since first grade. He answered the second question exactly as follows:

“Baba, question number two is tricky because you have to consider the media is always showing Black people looking poor and eating just whatever they can find, like even eating a dog or a cat or something. I didn’t see the newspaper but I wonder if they mentioned anything in there about what the government did with Aristide. I bet they didn’t even talk about the guns that the U.S. government [has] given the rebels over there to keep the fighting going on.”

Many of the other students chimed in offering their analyses as well. After about 15 minutes of discussion, Baba Akil said, “How come no one tackled question number 1?” Amari said, “I don’t know who Hugo Chavez is.” Then Baba Akil said to the class, “Okay, who is Hugo Chavez?” Kwao’s brother Kwaku chuckled, “It says right there he’s the president of Venezuela.” Amari responded, “I mean I don’t know if he’s a Pan Africanist type of person or if he just sees himself as Spanish or something.” Amari did not mean that he had never heard of Chavez, by his reply, he meant that he did not know Chavez’s racial/cultural politics. At that point Baba Akil said, “Okay, let’s look at Chavez...” He then pulled up a picture of Hugo Chavez on the internet and played a YouTube clip of President Chavez’s statement about President Bush. Next, he explained a few of Hugo Chavez’s attempted policies and some of his recent practices related to international oil supply and distribution. After the explanation he asked a student named Imani to explain Pan Africanism. Student questions and comments were interspersed throughout the discussion. Then, Baba Akil said, “We need more information to say for certain if he’s a Pan Africanist, but from what we know now, what do you think?” Students did not answer by saying yes or no, instead, through discussion they tried to parallel Chavez’s attempts and the tenets of Pan Africanism. Imani said, “I think he is a Pan Africanist because when he came to the U.S. Black people were all excited and everything and went out to see him.” Baba Akil responded, “When the Black people in the U.S. get excited about someone, does that mean they are a Pan Africanist?” Kwao belligerently said “No!” He continued, “They get excited about [R&B singers such as] Ne-Yo!” Baba Akil asked students again to explain how, then, it could be determined if someone like Chavez was a Pan Africanist. Kwame, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader said, “Since we don’t have all

the information we need to say if he is or isn't, we can say that he might not be, but he is in position to be in solidarity with Pan Africanists."

In the 14 years spent around African American students in other settings, we have not seen the level of analysis and discussion that is simply commonplace at NAS, and particularly the level of intellectual wherewithal that is present in Baba Akil's classes. All at once, as demonstrated above, Baba Akil incorporates critical thinking, cultural relevancy, Afrocentrism, critical questioning, reasoning, discussion, analysis, call and response, technology, and has students intensely engaged in the topic.

While teaching the students, when they get stuck, he may incorporate some "multiple perspectives" work as well. For example, he asks students to differentiate between an African perspective on a news topic and a mainstream (European American) perspective on the same news topic. Hanging in various places around the classroom are posters and sayings on the walls that reveal a pro Black sentiment. Sayings by prominent and popular leaders such as historian Dr. John Henrik Clarke and Malcolm X are posted in plain sight; they say: "If it's not about Nationbuilding, it's not about anything!" "Huey Newton said Black Power!" "Kwame Ture said 'Always Organize!'"

All of the walls in the classrooms are filled with reminders that what is going on is African – Peterson Projection Maps (which Afrocentric educators believe portray landmasses more accurately), and pictures of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, the continent of Africa, Drs. Yosef ben Jochannan and John Henrik Clarke, Elijah Muhammad, Ida B. Wells, Nat Turner, and Martin Luther King, Jr. are on the walls. There is virtually no uncovered space on the walls.

The pictures and sayings on the walls are not just décor, however. Baba Akil asked the students whether or not having an African American president would mean that Blacks had achieved the goals of Marcus Garvey. The responses were numerous, such as "Only if the African American president is able to get us to sovereignty." Since Garvey's central purpose was to regain African sovereignty Baba Akil agreed, but he appeared to desire more from the students, so he said, "Okay, pop quiz!" The students groaned. He said, "I want you to choose two people from the walls." (Recall that the walls are filled with Black leaders). He continued, "I want you to use words and phrases that the person on the wall would use if you asked that person whether or not having an African American president would fulfill the goals of Marcus Garvey." The students wrote their responses.

Since students seem to be quite responsive to his teaching, and since teachers in the building seem responsive to his leadership style, we wanted to know more about how Baba Akil understood his own disposition as a contributor to NAS' 35 year history. We asked him how his leadership and teaching styles accentuate the goals of Afrocentric education. Noticeably he seems to behave the same way with his staff as he does with students – with great humility and a strong desire to listen and understand. Recall that he is both founder and director of NAS, while also serving as a full-time teacher there. Baba Akil believes that what is needed



is "...working, stable, family-oriented and committed Africans – not charismatic leaders who possess charm, but have little to show for their work." Charisma is viewed as an energy that must be properly channeled because it can become destructive. This finding appeared to be consistent with observations made at NAS. Staff members do not adhere to a belief that a central dynamic figure is optimal for their operation. At meetings, Baba Akil contributes by giving input that comes from his experience, but he is not seen as having final 'authoritative' say. Generally, the staff appears to respect Baba Akil because he has proven his commitment and dedication by the work he has done with family and institution building. At NAS, a person is seen as successful if they can maintain positive and meaningful familial and community relationships. Baba Akil is seen as a "worker", and work is viewed as a noble, respectable trait. According to Baba Akil, "Charm is an energy that should be transferred to production." Baba Akil was asked where he got his unassuming disposition and his appreciation for hard work. He replied:

What I experienced in my youth, you know, I was next to last in my family to experience [the] all Black schools. We lived in rural Mississippi – it wasn't country. We had a cow, we had chickens. We had a farm, a mule. And then our little enclave. We were an extension of the bottom, you know Black folks lived at the bottom where flooding was more of a possibility. There was an enclave of families, about 8 families. The men would get together, when the water lines were down, we got together and took care of things. When things needed to be done, we did them. When my family moved to Atlanta, it was still a strong sense of community. Folks had a sense to go to college and come back. We were among the last of those that experienced that wholeness of a connected Black community. Every Black person you met on the road back then, you waved at them – gleefully. Simply because you were Black. Things were not simpler, but they were a lot clearer. A sense of accountability was there. I remember having to walk a couple of miles to school. I remember cursing one day, and a lady said, "I'm gonna tell you grandmother."

Baba Akil's teaching and administrating style reflect an African cosmology and epistemology. Children are taught new vocabulary words during Pan African class, but during that class they must also employ critical thinking and reasoning, science, technology, and other 'intelligences' while simultaneously being held to the high standard of communal as opposed to individual learning and advancement. As opposed to engaging in the "cult of personality", Baba Akil is able to advance a notion to both students and staff that the substance that births from hard work is more valuable than the excitement of flashy style and fleeting notoriety (to use his own words). In sum, Baba Akil's teaching reflects the coming together of Afrocentric philosophy and African cultural practice – both of which meld to create an example of what Afrocentric education can be when those involved in the endeavor are truly committed to the process of reAfricanization.

## Culture, Power and Education: The Importance of Commitment

## and Community

What is both stated and ostensibly drawn from the work of these educators is an important lesson for all teachers of Black children. During visits to the institutions where these educators work, we never saw or heard teachers yelling at students, calling them names, behaving cynically, or using sarcasm. All three teachers in this study work with students from extraordinarily impoverished areas, two of the schools are public charter institutions that are under immense pressure to make AYP, all three are under pressure to do well on standardized tests; they are taught to think ‘beyond’ the tests instead of *focusing* on them. None of the three teachers in this study use special reading or math programs. Yet, all three schools are making AYP, and all three schools feature Black students who are excited about learning in these classroom spaces, and at CR and NAS, these Black students are performing well on standardized tests. Many students at BCS are beginning to perform better on the tests as well. We have witnessed some of Brother Ture’s prior students calling him to announce that they have been accepted into college. The majority of students from CR and NAS attend college upon graduation.

Neither Baba Akil, Mama Bintu nor Brother Ture focus much attention on standardized tests. Even though their students come from the same neighborhoods as students who attend some extremely challenged public and public charter schools, we never heard any of them express concern that Afrocentric information is a distraction for their students because of the students’ harsh life circumstances and their need to simply focus on getting students read to pass “the test.” They prioritize African centered information over and above “the test.”

## Teaching as an Extension of Community Outreach

For Baba Akil, Mama Bintu and Brother Ture, the work they do in the classroom is merely an extension of the work they do in the community. In fact, as Baba Akil says, “The school is a cultural center where members of the community are welcome to send their children if they want to reconnect their children with Africa. We are here to support those families.” The ways that these educators see education is quite different than mainstream views of the same. These educators do not separate “education” from the larger community responsibility of passing information and knowledge on from one generation to the next. Also, these educators do not see themselves as being the “savior” in children’s lives. Instead, as Mama Bintu has said, “Their parents are their heroes and she-roes!” When added together, Mama Bintu and Baba Akil are saying that the teachers’ responsibility is to supplement and complement the African lifestyle of families within the community. Some families send their children to Afrocentric schools, but the family has not defined its own mission. Afrocentric schools may struggle to properly reach students from such families. Hence, Afrocentric schools are always in

the process of finding ways to engage entire families by hosting conferences and other community-based events.

Both Baba Akil and Mama Binta are parents themselves. Both of them founded their schools in order to find an appropriate place to educate their own children. Their advocacy for Afrocentric education does not come from a place of passion for education, necessarily. But instead, what they are actually focused on is community nation building.

Akoto's (1992) discussion of Afrocentric nationbuilding explains the need for a more holistic approach for attending to the educational and communal needs of Blacks. Akoto defines nationbuilding as:

The conscious and focused application of our people's collective resources, energies, and knowledge to the task of liberating and developing the psychic and physical space that we identify as ours. It involves the development of behaviors, values, language, institutions, and physical structures that elucidate our history and culture, concretize and protect the present, and insure the future identity and independence of the nation. Nationbuilding is the deliberate, keenly directed, focused, and energetic projection of the national culture, and the collective identity. (p. 3)

African centered leaders focus on African cultural adoption as an empowerment tool for Blacks. Nationbuilding is the foremost critical imperative for Blacks, and includes a process of reAfricanization. For example, Akoto (1992) describes the model for nationbuilding as largely a process of reAfricanization (p. 32). Therefore, nationbuilding is a process of re-connecting Blacks with who they are culturally, which also defines for them their personal and communal purposes. This means that the work that must be done within schools is simply the larger project of making the children from the community aware of the work that must be done within their own communities.

## Implications and Conclusions

Major educational challenges faced by Black children and communities have shaped the current interest in Afrocentric education in the United States. Ideological and what seem to be irreconcilable differences between Afrocentric educators and those in the mainstream have polarized the two groups. While Afrocentric education receives very little mainstream public attention, the act of ignoring the comprehensive offerings being made by this group of educationists aids and abets in keeping Black children in the lowest possible tiers. While many programs and projects have been tried on Black children, the act of centering their education on them has never really been tried en masse. When proposals are put forth to advance for Afrocentric education, those advocating for it are often met with hostility and/or unreasonable demands and questions. For example, when Afrocentric educationists (scholars, teachers, etc.) put their proposals forward, they may be asked to prove that it works. The request seems reasonable on it's

face, and there is evidence that “it works”; however, being asked to prove that an education which is centered on the learners it is supposed to be reaching works, is at best an awkward request, and at worst it is evidence of blatant hegemony. Imagine any group or species being asked to ‘prove’ that creating a relevant education for their young is really a good idea. In fact, while Afrocentric education is often negatively labeled and/or ignored, the employment of it represents one of the only responsible displays of Black behavior in existence today because it beseeches Blacks to prepare their children to take ownership and control over their own communities. Whatever amount of resources it would take to make Afrocentric education work should be expended because academic improvement on measures that are irrelevant to the children and their communities only exacerbates confusion. That is, low academic achievement is merely a symptom of the larger problem of cultural mismatch and basic miseducation.

Teachers, administrators, researchers and other education stakeholders should advocate for Afrocentric education because currently no other plan exists that is designed to offer Black children a useful education that teaches them to take agency over their own lives and communities. Perhaps one of the reasons that Afrocentric education seems “radical” to some is because when viewed sensibly and compositely, circumstances within Black communities represent something beyond a state of emergency (e.g., education disparities, economic disparities, belittling displays of Blacks in the media, overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, neo-segregation, apartheid, medical apartheid, overrepresentation of HIV/AIDS victims, etc.). Afrocentric education is the only type of education that attempts to prepare Black children to address their reality.

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